THE HOLY TIDE OF CHRISTMAS

December 30, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Luke 2:22-35

"...you are dismissing your servant in peace... for my eyes have seen your salvation."
-Luke 2:29 (NRSV)

Something happens when a baby appears in the midst of adult company. You've noticed it, of course. First, everybody smiles. You can't help it. Then, whatever else was going on stops: serious adult dialogue comes to a halt. A new and compelling priority has been established. Then the adults begin to act funny: most can't resist a pat; some try to establish contact, start up a conversation; a few settle for a restrained, modest wave. But almost everybody does something to say, "We're glad you're here. Your birth is a good thing."

These observations come from first-hand, personal experience. But it is also professional experience. Ministers know that while the theology of baptism is one of the strong foundations of the Reformed tradition, and while wars have been fought over the matter of whether infants or adolescents should be baptized, and whether it should be by immersion or sprinkling... ministers know that while all that is true, there is something else going on during baptism, which is altogether good and healthy.

How very wise of the founders of the Presbyterian Church to insist from the beginning that baptism is not a private rite but part of the regular, public worship of God. Those early Calvinists were not given to much levity. Religion was serious and adult business. Worship was never frivolous. They weren't at all certain that musical instruments, even pipe organs, were appropriate in the church. And I can't imagine humor and laughter occurring during the sermon. But they did insist that baptism happen in worship and they knew very well what happens when a baby appears in adult company. The baby is in charge. The baby may howl... which will embarrass the parents, delight the people and make the minister's face red - trying to read the very serious words accurately with a wailing infant in his or her arms.

I can't prove it of course, but I love to think that for all their seriousness, for all their adult reserve about public worship, they

intentionally introduced another dimension to religion by insisting that on regular intervals, babies be brought into this highly adult activity to redeem it, that is to save it from becoming too somber.

And so I say these things about babies out of some first-hand experience. But there is more.

The story of Simeon holding the infant in the Jerusalem Temple and uttering that lovely prayer - " O Lord, now lettest thou they servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation" - that passage in Luke shows up in the lectionary on this first Sunday of Christmas. I am not responsible for the lovely coincidence but the simple fact of the matter is that exactly twenty-four hours ago I was holding my new grandson in my arms.

Now - personal privilege. Babies do to grandparents what they do to all adults, only more so. This child is beautiful, obviously intelligent, gifted, a real leader. I'll have pictures after worship, and I promise to look at some of yours too.

So I speak about this story of Simeon in the Temple out of first-hand experience. When you hold the child something important is happening.

It is, I think, one of the most human and loveliest incidents in the Bible.

Mary and Joseph had brought their new baby to the temple as law required for the ceremonial cleansing and purifying and to present their first-born to God as Jewish parents had been doing for centuries. When they arrived at the temple they met Simeon who is described simply as "devout and upright, waiting for the consolation of Israel." And on the same occasion they met Anna, a prophetress.

The assumption is that Simeon was getting on in years. Who he was exactly is not known. But one of the best New Testament scholars, Raymond Brown, suggests that both he and Anna were members of a group of extraordinary devoted people who took their religion very seriously, who were probably utterly poor and who spent most of their waking hours around the Temple. They were, he says, totally dependent on God. In a review of a new book on "The History of the Black Church in America," in the The New York Times Book Review last week, [The Black Church in the African-American Experience, by Lincoln and Mamiya], James Forbes recalls that in the Pentecostal Church of his youth there were always "Church Mothers," women of enormous authority who presided over the community and were responsible for its health; who were always consulted in matters of importance.

That's who Simeon was, I think, an elder and when he sees Mary and Joseph and the baby on their way to meet a priest, he does what adults usually do, he fusses over this wonderful baby - and Mary blushes and Joseph shifts his weight from one foot to the other in a mixture of pride, embarrassment and impatience. And then Simeon "embraces" the child, takes him in his arms and says:

"O Lord, now let your servant
depart in peace... for my eyes
have seen this salvation that you
have made ready."
[Brown's translation]

What did Simeon see as he cradled that child?

I think he saw what we all see when we hold a baby in our arms. We see, first, a challenge to the status quo. Babies change things simply by showing up. We also see a vulnerability which has within it something lovely; something true about humanity; and, we see hope, the "consolation"... Simeon was waiting for, or "comfort," which is another word for it.

William Willimon wrote an essay a few years ago about his wife and he waiting for a new baby during Advent. Like most young ministers, he was aware of the way our culture fawns over the baby "cooing over the Little Lord Jesus of 'Away in the Manger.'"

"But with the birth of his own child he learned how
'threatening babies are."
[On a Wild and Windy Mountain, p. 23]

Herod knew, obviously, that this child was a threat to his authority. And we all do, Willimon observes. Babies put things in perspective and show us that our power and authority and dignity are rather fragile actually.

"I have found it difficult to retain my delusions of
adult authority and omnipotence when the wee one across
the breakfast table sends the cereal flying my
direction and then laughs at how funny I look with
oatmeal on my suit." [Ibid]

Babies challenge authority, reorder priorities just by showing up.

But there was something more, something mysterious. Simeon saw to the heart of that mystery we struggle to define and describe throughout this and every Christmastide, how God could come to us in this way, how the great and unnameable "I am" of history could become incarnate - enfleshed in this child.

Simeon saw - perhaps first - God's vulnerability, God's incredible love come in this helpless dependent infant. The hints are there for centuries: in the prophet's speaking of a God who is hurt by human cruelty, God whose heart may be broken by human unfaithfulness. The prophets told about a God who is vulnerable in love but it was not a word many heard or understood. It is what Simeon saw: God vulnerable: God at our disposal; God evoking the response of the human heart; not fear, guilt, disappointment, duty - but love.

W. H. Auden, in his Christmas Oratorio, For the Time Being, has Simeon saying: that the incomprhensible, "I Am," we can only fear - in this child becomes a "Thou Art" we can love.

Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel... meaning what? Another word for consolation is "comfort." And so we wait all year for the comfort the tenor aria proclaims in Handel's presentation of Isaiah 40 - "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people"; the comfort offered by the image of that wonderfully maternal God - who promises to comfort "as a mother comforteth her children."

"Tidings of Comfort and Joy" the old English carol put it, the mystery of Word made flesh, Almighty God come in the vulnerable baby. The simple but ultimate comfort in knowing that the "**I AM**" is now **"THOU ART."**

This child will challenge every status quo. This child, become a man, will make us forever dissatisfied with injustice and unnecessary suffering in our society, with violence and cruelty on our streets and between nations. This child will make us always dissatisfied with the compromises we make, this child will cause us to be always aspiring somewhere deep in our souls to be the children of God.

But first and last and always - this baby is our consolation, our hope, our comfort, the promise of God's unending love which will never let us go.

Frederick Buechner to whom you hear me refer with some frequency, is a novelist and a minister. His most recent book is The Wizard's Tide, a story about a young boy, Teddy Schroeder and his little sister, Bean, their parents and grandparents, in a particular time during the Great Depression. Those familiar with Buechner's other books know that the story is really autobiographical.

Mr. Schroder, Teddy's father, is not doing well during the Depression. The family is accustomed to a very comfortable life-style and is managing to maintain it because of the generosity of grandparents. But Mr. Schroeder can't keep a job, spends his time pursuing various peculiar schemes to make money, losing more all the time, drinking too much, and now berated and humiliated by his wife. His children adore him. He is a good father.

Teddy remembers a day at the beach when his father taught him about tides and waves and how to catch one and ride it into shore.

The waves and the high tide, his father tells him, will take him where he wants to go, to dry land, to home...

On the same day he swims with his father and when he becomes tired his father carries him on his back and Buechner remembers,

> "His father did things that he wished he wouldn't, like drink too many cocktails and drive his car up on the lawn and come to kiss him and Bean goodnight, with his face all clammy and cold.

"But as he swam out toward the barrels on his father's back, he also knew that there was no place in the whole Atlantic Ocean where he felt so safe." [p. 46]

And then one day his father goes into New York City to look for work and does not return. He commits suicide.

The family moves to Pittsburgh to live with grandparents. The children are "protected" from "it" and so their father is never mentioned.

They were not a church family, but on Christmas Eve they all go. Buechner remembers:

"The service began with everybody standing up while the choir marched in, holding candles and singing 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing.' Then the minister stood up in a pulpit with a roof on it which Teddy whispered to Bean, looked like the orange juice squeezer. He read some parts of the Bible that have to do with Christmas.

"Then they sat down and sang carols from little paper books the ushers handed out. 'Silent Night,' 'O Come All Ye Faithful,' 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen,' and then when the plate had been passed the minister raised his arms in the air, said one last thing and then everybody got up and started putting on their coats to go home."

Later, in their beds, Teddy and Bean talk. Bean asked Teddy if he remembered the carol that had the part about the beach in it.

"The beach!" Teddy said. "Christmas carols aren't about the beach, dopey."

"This one was," Bean said. She jumps out of bed, finds the little Carol Book and flips the pages.

"There, read it yourself."

Teddy took it out of her hands and read it himself.

"Now to the Lord sing praises, all you within this place.
And with true love and (charity) each other now embrace.
"This Holy Tide of Christmas doth bring redeeming grace."

"What is the tide of Christmas then if you think you're so smart," Bean asked.

Teddy put the book down.

"It's that high tide, Bean. It's the one that brings you home."

"Everybody?" Bean said.

"Everybody," Teddy said.

"It didn't make her cry. Teddy turned the light off and they lay there in the dark without saying anything for a little while. Then they fell asleep."

And Simeon, waiting for the consolation of Israel, took the child in his arms and said:

"O Lord, now lettest thou thy servant
depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen
thy salvation."

Amen.

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O Lord, in this season, in many ways, we have held the child... We have seen, in him, your vulnerable love which is our salvation. So now give us your peace: in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.